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SUBJECT: MONDULKIRI PROVINCE: TRADITION, ELECTIONS AND THE CHINESE

¶1. (U) Summary. During the Embassy's recent election monitoring program, Emboffs visited Cambodia's remote Mondulkiri Province on the Vietnamese border. Mondulkiri is a rapidly-changing region that encapsulates most of the major issues affecting Cambodia and its minority population -- property rights and tenancy, environmental degradation, deforestation, illegal logging, land seizures and Chinese economic expansion. Despite a strong sense of alienation among minority Phnong and other tribal groups, Mondulkiri remains a stronghold of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). End Summary.

The Road to Mondulkiri

¶2. (U) Mondulkiri Province borders Vietnam and is approximately 400 kilometers to the northeast of Phnom Penh. With an estimated 45,000 inhabitants, it is Cambodia's least populated province but is also the largest in terms of geographic area (over 14,000 square kilometers). Historically, the majority of the inhabitants have been ethnic Phnong and other indigenous tribes. However, over the past few years, ethnic Khmer and some Cham have been moving in to settle "unclaimed" land. Upon entering Mondulkiri Province, the main paved road ends and Khmer-style houses begin giving way to the circular thatched huts of the Phnong as the road becomes narrower and rougher and begins to wind up and down the foothills. The road traffic dwindles to occasional trucks groaning under the weight of fresh-cut timber.

¶3. (U) The road eventually passes through an unmanned checkpoint entrance to the Sey Ma Bio-Diversity Protection Area with prominent forest cover. However, when the road reaches a plateau, the immediate areas are occupied by improvised Khmer-style houses and lean-tos with no sign of water, sewage or electricity -- evidence of the Khmer newcomers. There is pervasive clear-cutting and slash-and-burn farming accompanied by smoldering tree stumps in the distance. Sprinkled among the stumps in the gray, sandy soil are little patches of cassava and vegetable crops. As the road leaves the plateau and climbs up the foothills, the squatter settlements give way to thicker forest cover interspersed with patches of clear-cutting and reforestation projects.

Sen Monorom and the "Wild East"

¶4. (U) The provincial capital, Sen Monorom, has a population of 7,000 and is an unlikely international crossroads -- a couple of paved roads, a spate of guesthouses, a traffic circle, a market street, a ramshackle provincial theater, and four or five restaurants. Despite the lack of amenities, the town has a surprising cultural mix. There are a handful of Western NGO workers and missionaries, the town's two-star hotel has Chinese financial backing, Phnong tribespeople from the surrounding villages regularly bring their livestock, produce and crafts to market, and Vietnamese officials and businessmen make regular visits from the nearby border. During Emboffs' brief visit, we met American missionaries,

an Israeli innkeeper, German tourists and a French restaurant owner. There has been a significant increase in tourism over the last few years, with many new guesthouses geared to the growing foreign backpacker tourist trade. There are now enough foreign tourists and NGOs to support a combination pizzeria/falafel shop.

15. (U) Despite the growth in tourism, Sen Monorom's reputation as a shady border town remains valid. According to our embassy warden, it is not unusual to see Vietnamese soldiers driving around town. During our election monitoring visit, Embosffs' saw a Vietnamese military officer and a group of well-dressed officials exit a local business and drive off in an expensive, late model SUV with Vietnamese plates. Despite their official appearance and distinctive dress, they drew no attention or notice from the crowded street.

16. (U) Sen Monorom's small size and obscurity heightens the disparities of wealth and influence. The local CPP headquarters, European NGOs and guesthouses catering to foreigners occupy new, freshly-painted buildings with the basic amenities. By contrast, the local primary school a few blocks away is old and decrepit, with no plumbing or electricity. The classrooms have only crude blackboards and maps and the classroom benches and tables are covered with graffiti, there are no books. The French NGO Action contre Le Faim (Action against Hunger) set up operations due to recent crop failures in the Phnong villages that have led to increasing levels of malnutrition throughout Mondulkiri. Some Phnong reportedly have sold their land for as little as 10 bags of rice and have little means to support their families.

Visit to the Phnong Village of Pu Tru

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17. (U) The election monitoring trip centered on Pu Tru, where Embosffs were assisted by our local warden, a fluent speaker of both Khmer and Phnong. Almost all the Phnong live in round, unventilated thatched huts with neither plumbing nor electricity. The huts require constant upkeep to remain habitable and usually must be rebuilt after 7 years. The ceilings inside the huts are coated with a black resinous soot from a constant fire that is tended in the middle of the hard-packed dirt floor. The Phnong sit on suspended wooden flooring planks that extend along the length of a hut. Dogs, pigs and chickens rest underneath the planking and wander in and out of the huts. Large cylindrical porcelain vats line the back of the huts, usually containing homemade rice wine. Many of these vats have rather intricate bas-relief and are said to be hundreds of years old. For a typical Phnong family, these black vats are among their most prized possessions.

18. (U) Yet in the midst of this traditional lifestyle, modern life intrudes. Some huts have a motorcycle parked next to them and there are occasional DVC players, radios and television sets. Khmer-style houses are now fashionable and are the preferred housing for the village chieftain and favored tribal elders. In the middle of the village, a Japanese NGO has installed state-of-the-art solar energy panels and the Red Cross has provided the Phnong a sophisticated water filtration system to ensure a reliable source of potable water. Despite the availability of electricity and treated water, the villagers of Pu Tru still prefer to wash their clothes and bathe in a nearby creek.

19. (U) After talking to a Phnong family in their hut, we then toured the village fields and grazing areas. The seemingly random patches of subsistence crops belie a rather sophisticated, environmentally-sensitive agricultural system. The Phnong rotate a variety of crops through a series of fields, often leaving fields fallow for years before replanting. The Phnong also deliberately plant a variety of different crops in small patches to take advantage of the shade and/or disease resistance one plant can provide for another.

Election Issues? What's An Election Issue?

¶10. (SBU) The villagers we spoke with were reluctant to voice partisan political views on the upcoming commune elections. Nevertheless, the adult villagers had a strong desire to vote and were hoping they could secure rides from friends or from a village elder to the polls. There seemed to be an unspoken disconnect between the communal elections and the real concerns of their village -- the ongoing encroachment of their lands by the Khmer and, most recently, their new Chinese neighbors.

¶11. (SBU) Although the Phnong exist on meager resources, these concerns pale in significance to the growing threat of land confiscation, encroachment on their grazing areas and the accompanying external pressures on their indigenous way of life. Although not well articulated, the Phnong feel pressed on all sides. Vietnam imposes constraints on their ability to travel to their neighboring Montagnard cousins in Vietnam; Cambodia sends its dispossessed lowland farmers to squat on their land and set up tourist concessions on Phnong areas without their permission.

¶12. (SBU) Most despised now, however, are the Chinese who have encroached on Phnong lands, but also have imposed severe grazing restrictions, something the Khmer have never attempted. The Phnong claim that their new Chinese neighbors have threatened to shoot any cattle that stray onto Chinese-occupied land. Moreover, the Phnong say the Chinese have also threatened to detain any Phnong suspected of property crimes, meting out punishments outside of the Cambodian criminal justice system. The Chinese routinely accuse the Phnong of burning their new pine plantations. The Phnong counter that, although they traditionally burn off grasslands every year to create new pastures, they do not target the Chinese pine stands. Rather, they maintain that the Khmer who work for the Chinese are angry at getting paid only 5,000 riel (USD 1.25) per day and burn the plantations themselves. Khmer locals reportedly are angry at the Chinese for taking land that they had planned on occupying and may have set fires in retaliation. One Phnong commune official has reportedly seen Khmer policemen and soldiers setting fire to the plantations.

Elections: Co-Opted Tribal Elders Key to CPP Success

¶13. (U) Election day turnout on April 1 was modest in the precincts surveyed, with most of the voting completed before lunch. Voter queues were orderly except in the Phnong villages, where the villagers often clustered outside the polling stations, usually the village schoolhouse. No violent incidents or confrontations were reported. The election officials seemed reasonably well-versed in following the correct procedures at the polling stations. On two

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separate occasions, Embodys witnessed election officials turn away unregistered or late-registered voters. The COMFREL monitors as well as the political party agents were all cordial to each other. There were no disputed ballots and the vote tallying proceeded in an orderly fashion with only minor procedural delays. By early evening, the monitored precinct reported lopsided victories for the CPP, which garnered more than 80% of the votes. The opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) trailed with 16% of the vote followed by FUNCINPEC with a remaining 4%. Local observers speculated that the CPP's success was greatly assisted by the rather low turnout and the CPP-affiliated Phnong tribal elders, who encouraged the Phnong to vote as a bloc.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Mondulkiri remains firmly in the hands of the CPP, despite the many problems faced by its indigenous Phnong community. The CPP's strategy of co-opting tribal elders and through them, delivering the majority of Phnong voters to the CPP has paid off - this tradition pre-dates UNTAC times and is also applied in Ratanakiri. Given the low population density and expansive area of Mondulkiri, the SRP and other political parties do not find the expenditure of time, personnel, and resources to be cost-effective in trying to mobilize an opposition vote. However, as Mondulkiri becomes less isolated, the quickening pace of outside encroachment

on the traditional Phnong way of life could present the CPP with new challenges in maintaining control over Phnong voters.

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